

Pollution of power in a tale of two cities



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

From even the beginning of civilization, social hierarchy molded the formation and development of society. Whether it be the power of a single monarch or that of a democratic board of officials, authority always induces change in both the lives of those under rule and even the life of the one in power. Charles Dickens' timeless novel *A Tale of Two Cities* follows the conspiracies buried in the heart of the French Revolution, between Paris and London. Centered on the cast of the Manettes, Evremondes, and those touched by either the kind hand of the former or the wicked hand of the latter, the classic tale is one of undeniable love and sacrifice amid a raging revolution. Although Dickens sets the scene with government corruption and power-hungry nobles as the cause of immense social upheaval, the Marquis, Madame Defarge, and Charles Darnay also fell into the wrath of power and its consequences. As portrayed in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the idea that even the most upright individuals are tainted and warped by authority prevails as a horrifying, yet realistic truth.

Firstly, the characterization and actions of the Marquis serve as a classic example of how power corrupts one's moral identity. In "Monseigneur in Town," Marquis Evremonde stormed off from Monseigneur's reception, only for his speeding carriage to strike a child on the road. In response to his crime, the Marquis coldly blamed the father, exclaiming, "It is extraordinary to me that you people cannot take care of yourselves and your children... How do I know what injury you have done to my horses?... I would ride over any of you very willingly and exterminate you from the earth" (Dickens 111-12). This quote demonstrates the haughty, insensitive manner of the Marquis, prioritizing the safety of his horses over the life of an innocent child.

Borned into the Evremonde family of nobles, he lacked compassion for the peasants while assuming they could simply abandon a life of poverty for a better one. For a man with considerable influence, the Marquis certainly did not value the lives of the lower class. Therefore, Marquis Evremonde represents the French aristocracy and their unanimous disregard for the citizens. Moreover, as revealed in Dr. Manette's secret letter, the Marquis and his brother took advantage of their aristocratic power to conceal Dr. Manette after he learned of the heinous crimes they committed against a peasant girl and her brother. After intercepting Manette's letter to the Minister, "the two brothers... identified [him] with a single gesture... and [he] was brought to [his] living grave," the Bastille where he would be wrongfully imprisoned for 18 years (Dickens 329). Therefore, the Evremondes used their status and inheritance to commit atrocities such as these, which would later dictate the infamous Evremonde family. The French peasants feared the nobility for their recklessness with the authority they were so privileged to hold. Overall, the Marquis embodies the elite French class in *A Tale of Two Cities* in his corruption of power and subsequent injustices they perform on the lower classes.

While Dickens credits the upper class as the main abusers of power, Madame Defarge's actions also distinguish her as someone overtaken by the temptations of authoritative control. Strong-willed and bloodthirsty for the downfall of the Evremondes, revenge fueled Madame Defarge's mission to end the nobility with a chop of the guillotine. As the younger sister of the peasant girl and boy slain by the Marquis, Defarge vowed to avenge them by ending the Evremonde line. However, her rage consumed her as Madame

Defarge targeted those with any connection to the Evremondes, including Lucie Manette and her daughter, as “ it was nothing to her, that [Darnay’s] wife be made a widow and his daughter an orphan; that was insufficient punishment, because they were her natural enemies and her prey, and as such had no right to live” (Dickens 359). Thus, as a leader of the French Revolution from St. Antoine, this influence in deciding who lives and who dies (or rather, whose name is knitted and whose is not) engrossed her to replace any morality of her conscience. She would only hold satisfaction in murdering all of the Marquis’ descendants, regardless of their connection to the crime against her sister. Carrying the blood of the Evremonde family and marrying an Evremonde was enough for Madame Defarge to mark them down. When Lucie pleaded for Madame Defarge to side with Darnay, she bluntly rejected her plea, arguing, “ The wives and mothers we have been used to see... have not been greatly considered?... All our lives, we have seen our sister-women suffer, in themselves and in their children, poverty, nakedness, hunger, thirst, sickness, misery, oppression, and neglect of all kinds?” (Dickens 267). Ironically, Madame Defarge failed to reflect on her actions which can be compared to the horrific injustices of the Marquis himself. In both cases, one who yielded authority used it to commit crimes, thus tearing apart families and destroying the lives of many. Ultimately, despite Madame Defarge’s firm stance against the nobility, her control on the Revolution corrupted her just as it did to the Marquis.

Departing from the incidents with the Marquis and Madame Defarge, the concept of the insidious nature of authority also applies to those who do not abuse their sovereignty themselves, as in the case of Charles Darnay. Born

as an Evremonde, yet renouncing his title and association with the infamous Evremonde household, the family's reputation preceded Charles Darnay, and consequently led to much suffering during his lifetime. As Dickens emphasized how his ancestors polluted the simple life he tried to live, "Drawn to the Loadstone Rock" describes Darnay's reflection on the potential results of returning to Paris: "He knew very well, that in his horror of the deed which had culminated the bad deeds and bad reputation of the old family house... He knew that very well, that in his love for Lucie, his renunciation of his social place, though by no means new to his own mind, had been hurried and incomplete" (Dickens 238). This quote shows that Darnay could not escape from his family's history, even when it threatened the lives of his wife and daughter. Additionally, this connects to Shelley's assertion; despite his divergence from the Evremonde lineage, the atrocities linked to the household he was born into still haunted him, and this was a direct result of the powerful position in society Darnay inherited. Another example is when Monsieur Defarge denied Darnay his rights, ignoring their mutual relationship with Dr. Manette and Lucie. The two argued about Darnay's motives for coming to Paris: "'I have come here voluntarily, in response to that written appeal... Is that not my right?'... 'Other people have been similarly buried in worse prisons, before now.' 'But never by me, Citizen Defarge.' 'I will do nothing for you. My duty is to my country and the People. I am the sworn servant of both'" (Dickens 251). As shown in this quote, Defarge judged Darnay on the Evremonde title rather than on his morals and relationship with the Manettes. Therefore, even when Charles Darnay abandoned his name to live separate from his relatives, power still polluted his life and ruined his chances of living a peaceful life with his

family. Darnay himself was not corrupted by power, but nonetheless, it devoured him and those around him thanks to the notorious Evremonde title.

The venomous nature of power is demonstrated by significant characters in *A Tale of Two Cities*: the Marquis, Madame Defarge, and Charles Darnay. Sovereignty can overtake one's morals and taint one's reputation, regardless of whether they were corrupted themselves or by those connected to them. The three characters all encountered the unethical results of abusing power, directly and indirectly, through their roles in Dickens' novel. However, Dickens and Shelley both instill a sense of self-reflection in their readers; some use privileges to uphold their morals while others patronize those around them with this power. Ultimately, those who perform the latter suffer as a result, just as the Marquis, Madame Defarge, and Darnay all paid for their actions and their family's actions with their own lives or the life of another.